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Per Earhart, Amelia

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U.S. DECLASSIFIES FILE

Earhart Sea Theory Backed

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A newly declassified government file on Amelia Earhart reinforces the official story that the slim aviatrix died at sea after missing a tiny mid-Pacific landfall 30 years ago this month.

The three-inch-thick file contains a report of radio traffic from Miss Earhart's twin-engine plane for several hours prior to its disappearance on the longest and most dangerous leg of a planned round-the-world trip. Indications are that the craft ran out of gas between 40 and 200 miles north of Howland Island.

Howland, a speck of land midway between New Guinea and Hawaii, was the destination for which Miss Earhart and navigator Fred J. Noonan filed a flight plan on July 2, 1937. From Lae, New Guinea, where they took off that morning to Howland is about as far as from New York to Los Angeles.

The Coast Guard cutter Itasca, assigned to "guard" Miss Earhart's flight path in the mid-Pacific, monitored the plane's radio channels in the last hours and then instituted search. Other signals received subse-



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quently were thought to be genuine and caused the search to be diverted from the most probable splashdown area.

These signals — later determined to be a hoax — may have

cost Miss Earhart and Noonan their lives, although it is equally possible that the searchers would not have found them even if the effort had continued undisturbed.

In any event, the Itasca's report seems to torpedo a long-standing hypothesis that Miss Earhart and Noonan were captured by the Japanese and executed as spies on the island of Saipan. Saipan is about 3,000 miles from Howland Island.

"A careful evaluation of all available data indicates that Miss Earhart's plane landed on the sea to the northwest of Howland Island," Capt. E. G. Rifenburg, director of the Naval Investigative Service said in a recent letter to Sen. Walter F. Mondale, D-Minn., summarizing the Earhart-Noonan case.

The Itasca log showed frequent transmissions from the plane beginning about 2½ hours before "the last authentic message" was received. This was at 8:55 a.m. Howland Island time July 2, while the plane, running low on gas, was beating a north-south course apparently in an effort to make a landfall.

Miss Earhart, an accomplished pilot, and Noonan, one of

the most experienced trans-Pacific navigators of the time, brought all their airmanship skills to bear in trying to reach the island. But bad weather the night before seems to have cut overly deeply into their gasoline supply.

At 7:42 a.m. Miss Earhart informed the Itasca that she had "30 minutes of gas remaining," but managed to nurse this meager ration for about 1¼ hours.

Radio signals from the plane were received at their greatest strength at 7:58 a.m., a little less than one hour before the end. Apparently the plane and ship were closest together at this time but neither observed the other.

The Itasca, a white ship about 300 feet long, was laying a smoke screen during the early morning hours in an effort to provide an easily visible marker for the plane. Because visibility was ideal to the south and east of Howland but impaired by clouds to the north and west, Itasca's skipper assumed that the plane was northwest of the island.

Lost as End Neared

For all his skill as a navigator, Noonan was lost as the end approached. The plane reported at 6:46 and 7:42 a.m. that its position was doubtful.

According to a letter clipped to the newly released file, a "confidential" classification that had stuck for 30 years was removed when the Federal Bureau of Investigation and State Department agreed to remove secrecy wraps from certain pieces of correspondence.

While reinforcing the "lost-at-sea" theory, the file also contained some documents favoring the "shot-as-spies" line. One of these quoted a native of Saipan named Carlos Palacios as having seen a woman, later to be executed, who resembled Miss Earhart.

In Palacios' words, the woman's appearance was, "Hair cut short, no make-up, slim girl—not fat, not big in front of chest." Miss Earhart, who was three weeks short of her 39th birthday when she vanished, had a boyish figure and wore her hair closely cropped. Some people thought she bore a resemblance to the principal male flier of the time, Charles A. Lindberg.